



# Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Units

## WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM?

Thousands of unplanned environmental releases of toxins occur each year.

- More than 1,500 uncontrolled hazardous-waste sites are on the National Priorities List (NPL) and are targeted for clean-up by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).
- In the United States, one in four children lives within 4 miles of a hazardous waste site and are at greater risk of exposure to environmental contamination.

## WHAT HAS ATSDR ACCOMPLISHED?

In 1998, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) joined with the Association of Occupational and Environmental Clinics (AOEC) to develop the Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit (PEHSU) program. The PEHSUs are also supported by the EPA. The program serves as a national resource for pediatricians, other healthcare providers, and communities. The program is designed to:

- Reduce environmental health threats to children
- Improve access to expertise in pediatric environmental medicine
- Strengthen public health prevention capacity

The key focus areas of the units are clinical consultation, education to health and medical personnel, and clinical specialty referrals for children who may have been exposed to hazardous substances in the environment. PEHSU physicians specifically trained in both pediatrics and environmental medicine are available on a case-by-case basis to provide education consultative services to children, their parents, and their health care providers. The environmental health and medical education the PEHSUs offer provide health professionals specialized training and objective information on child environmental health concerns. Similar education is also provided to community populations that have environmental health concerns. During FY 2005, PEHSU staff provided more than 900 medical consultations addressing concerns of exposure among children, clinically referred more than 700 children for diagnostic or treatment services from pediatric environmental medicine specialists, and provided education and training activities to more than 22,000 healthcare and public health professionals and more than 54,000 community members.

## WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

Public use and demand for the PEHSU services continues to be strong and valued by all receiving their service. Currently, there are 11 PEHSUs operating in the United States; at least one is located in each of the 10 federal DHHS regions. The PEHSU reputation has grown and these units now serve as a model for other countries interested in addressing the needs of children who face environmental threats. Three independently funded International PEHSUs now exist in Mexico, Canada, and Spain and interest in replicating the PEHSU network is high in other Central and South American countries. The existing international units are partners in bilateral children's health issues. ATSDR and EPA are collaboratively working to strengthen the capability of the U.S. PEHSU network to provide more service within the federal regions and to provide technical assistance to those countries who intend to replicate this model.